



# ***Iowa Outdoors***

**Iowa Department of Natural Resources**  
**[www.iowadnr.com](http://www.iowadnr.com)**

**[www.iowanaturestore.com](http://www.iowanaturestore.com)**

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**Jan. 3, 2006**

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## **FIRST WEEKEND IN MAY IS NOW FREE CAMPING WEEKEND EACH YEAR**

DES MOINES – The Iowa Department of Natural Resources has designated the first weekend in May each year to be free camping weekend for Iowa residents. Free camping weekend only impacts state parks, and not county and federal campgrounds.

“Free camping weekend is a way to get people thinking and talking about camping, to encourage them to get out their gear and blow off the dust, and spend a weekend in the park on us,” said Kevin Szcodronski, chief of state parks for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. “We chose the first weekend in May to avoid any conflict with Mother’s Day, and to not crowd Memorial Day.”

Free camping weekend began in 2002, and is for Iowa residents only. Nonresidents may camp during that weekend, but must pay the appropriate camping fee.

**For more information, contact Szcodronski at 515-281-8674.**

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## **BALD EAGLES VACATION IN IOWA**

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

It was another of those single digit mornings. Ice at the Guttenberg lock and dam boat ramp kept anglers from launching there. Downstream, the city ramp must have been iced in, too. I didn't see a boat on the water. But the fishing was good...for the bald eagles who took turns snatching gizzard shad from the rolling water just below the locks.

More than a dozen slowly wheeled over the open water, watching for fish stunned as they came through the churning rollers. A quick half-circle, a drop, and a big bird would pump its wings to lift skyward, another shad in its razor sharp talons. From there, it was straight across the channel to the cottonwood trees to chow down, then loaf for a couple hours.

Though the aerial circus was impressive enough, the dozens of white heads dotting the tops of the trees underscored the sight. Counting them, along with the harder to detect dark heads of immature birds, I tallied 84 more. I had already noted six in a tree on my side of the river. That meant I was looking at over 100 bald eagles, with scores more downstream or inland for their hunting. And this was just one location on the Upper Mississippi River and the larger interior streams that attract eagles throughout Iowa's winters.

Not bad for a bird of prey which nearly disappeared from the lower 48 States less than half a century ago. "That's part of the mystique of bald eagles; that we almost lost our national symbol," acknowledges Bruce Ehresman, wildlife diversity biologist for the Department of Natural Resources. "They have made a great recovery. Beyond that, they are just beautiful to watch: powerful and dexterous as they grasp fish out of the water. It's just incredibly awe inspiring."

Most people know the background by now. Pesticides--particularly DDT--built up in the systems of bald eagles, resulting in paper-thin eggshells as they nested. That meant few young were hatched. With loss of habitat as another threat, eagle numbers spiraled downward in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. Public outcry and Congressional action spurred legislation ranging from the Endangered Species Act to the Bald Eagle Protection Act. Along with help from landowners, bald eagle numbers began slowly climbing. Today, the numbers speak for themselves.

Over the next couple weeks, the midwinter Bald Eagle survey will be carried out across the country. The survey gives biologists a one-time snapshot of eagle numbers, a number that has soared in Iowa and much of the rest of the Continental U.S. In 1985, volunteers came up with 383 eagles in the midwinter survey. Less than two decades later, the count was 4,400. It dipped back to about 4,000 last year, with milder temperatures spreading the birds across their range, making it hard to count them.

A dozen communities along the Mississippi and inland as far as central Iowa make bald eagle watching a cold weather 'event.' Most have spotting scopes and volunteers on hand to point observers toward any nearby eagles. Some have indoor programs, with birds of prey from rehabilitation centers for up close looks at the powerful beaks, the graceful builds and the intimidating claws.

But if you want to just go out and see eagles, there are some spots that are pretty close to a guarantee. “The Mississippi River is always the ‘failsafe.’ You can always find bald eagles below the lock and dam,” assures Ehresman. In the bitter cold, it is a matter of not ‘if,’ but ‘how many’ of them will be drawn to the only open water for miles. Bragging on the phone about the 100 I saw at Guttenberg, the guy at the other end mentioned 50 he had seen on the ice there. And he wasn’t even looking for them!

And those soaring numbers are not limited to cold weather viewing. Ehresman says there were 190 nests across Iowa in the summer of 2005. Just 30 years prior, there were none. The big birds may hit 200 nests next season. “We are starting to see them close to urban areas, now,” offers Ehresman, though still cautioning sightseers to steer clear when possible; using spotting scopes and staying in a vehicle to avoid pushing them off their roosts or out a feeding situation.

### **Not Out of the Woods Yet**

Though their rebound is remarkable, bald eagles still face an uphill climb. They are still listed as ‘endangered’ in Iowa; ‘threatened’ in North America. While many conservationists hope to see that status changed, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is admittedly moving slowly, recognizing that numbers were so low just a few decades ago, and also to avoid undervaluing the Endangered Species Act. Even if removed—and Ehresman says his recommendation to the feds is to list bald eagles as ‘of special concern,’ they would still be protected under the separate Bald Eagle Protection Act. That offers the pressure of many thousands of dollars in fines for harming or possessing an eagle, or parts (such as feathers) thereof.

### **Local Viewing**

Though you won’t tally hundreds of white heads and tails, bald eagles are becoming regulars at interior locations, in limited engagements. Often an extended thaw—as we’ve seen for the last week—will lure a few away from the Big River. Lowhead dams or any other factor that creates open water is enough for a couple to take roost. Tailwaters below Iowa’s flood reservoirs; Coralville, Red Rock, Saylorville and sometimes Rathbun attract anywhere from a couple to a couple dozen in warmer winter weather.

And while still a regal symbol of flight and freedom, eagles still aren’t above picking out a little carrion from on high. Though people might not endorse their dining habits, they can’t deny the bonus sightings around livestock operations.

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## **TREES AND SHRUBS FOR WILDLIFE HABITAT AVAILABLE THIS SPRING**

Bird watchers, hunters and nature lovers realize the habitat created by trees and shrubs is critical to wildlife survival in Iowa.

“Though one tree gives some benefits, a diverse planting of trees and shrubs give the greatest benefits to the most wildlife,” said John Walkowiak, chief of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources forestry bureau. “In response to the desire of the general public to expand wildlife habitat on their own lands, the State Forest Nursery is offering low cost Songbird and Wildlife Packets of hardy native trees and shrubs.”

The Songbird packet was developed in cooperation with Audubon Iowa. The packet has 20 trees and shrub bareroot seedlings and is ideal for someone who has an area in their yard to devote to wildlife. The Songbird Packet sells for \$20 (includes shipping) and consists of two bur oaks, two white pine, four wild plum, four chokecherry, four gray dogwoods and four serviceberry plants. The bareroot seedlings are 8 to 24 inches tall.

New for 2006 is the Create-A Wildlife packet for the small acreage owners of 1 to 5 acres, where individuals may choose the tree and shrub combination in units of 50, with a total package of 200. This new packet sells for \$90.

In addition, a special Turkey packet, developed in cooperation with the Iowa Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation, contains 50 bur oak, 50 red oak, 50 pin oak and 50 gray dogwoods. A special Pheasant packet, developed in cooperation with Iowa Pheasants Forever, contains 50 redcedar, 50 wild plum, 50 ninebark and 50 gray dogwood. Finally, a special Quail packet containing 100 wild plum and 100 gray dogwoods is also available.

To order Songbird or any of the Wildlife packets contact the State Forest Nursery in Ames at 1-800-865-2477 or go on line to [www.iowadnr.com/forestry/](http://www.iowadnr.com/forestry/). The State Forest Nursery staff will confirm your order and bill you or you can pay by credit card. The packets will be delivered to your door in mid April to May, with instructions and ready to plant.

For more information, contact Walkowiak at 515-242-5966 or [john.walkowiak@dnr.state.ia.us](mailto:john.walkowiak@dnr.state.ia.us)

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## **SURFING FOR TREES THIS SPRING**

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) forestry bureau developed [www.iowatreeplanting.com](http://www.iowatreeplanting.com) to serve as a convenient and reliable place for information about trees, shrubs and habitat.

“Iowatreeplanting.com was created to be the one stop shopping source for information for people who want to plant hundreds of trees on their acreage or one tree in their yard,” said John Walkowiak, chief of the DNR’s forestry bureau.

“Iowatreeplanting.com promotes the use of native trees and shrubs for conservation and landscaping purposes, and has a complete listing of Iowa’s native woody plants, along with a complete listing of Iowa public and private nursery sources,” Walkowiak said.

Iowatreeplanting.com includes tips from foresters and wildlife biologists on creating wildlife habitat and protecting Iowa’s water quality. “There is even information on how to plant and care for your new trees. The web site also includes sample landscape and habitat designs that people can use,” he added.

People interested in planting trees this spring should not wait for warm weather to think about plantings. “Most nurseries operate on a first come first served basis and those interested should start planning now and investigate plant availability and prices and [www.iowatreeplanting.com](http://www.iowatreeplanting.com) is a perfect place to start,” Walkowiak said.

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## **2005 HUNTING, FISHING LICENSES EXPIRE JAN. 10**

DES MOINES –Hunters and anglers are encouraged to purchase their 2006 licenses soon before their 2005 licenses expire. The 2005 Iowa hunting and fishing licenses expire on Jan. 10. Deer hunters who plan to hunt the January antlerless season must purchase a 2006 small game license and pay the habitat fee, if normally required.

Licenses are available at more than 1,000 locations and many DNR offices across the state. Licenses are also available on-line at [www.iowadnr.com](http://www.iowadnr.com).

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